

TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

10 December 1973 was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The General Assembly commemorated the event, at United Nations headquarters in New York, with a meeting at which addresses were delivered by Mr. Leopoldo Benites (Ecuador), President of the twenty-eighth session of the General Assembly; Mr. Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General; representatives of the different geographical groups of States Members of the United Nations, and Mr. John Humphrey, former Director of the Division of Human Rights. The speakers reviewed the effect of the Universal Declaration over the quarter of a century of its existence. It was pointed out that, unfortunately, in many cases the principles proclaimed in 1948 had remained abstract affirmations. Several speakers expressed disquiet at the numerous violations of human rights which the world continued to witness.

CONFERENCE FOR THE ABOLITION OF TORTURE

A Conference for the Abolition of Torture convened by Amnesty International was held in Paris on 10 and 11 December 1973, at the Tour Olivier de Serres Centre. It had a twofold purpose : to focus public attention on the epidemic and global proportions of torture, and to develop and initiate effective means of eliminating its use by governments and their agencies. It was presided over by Mr. Sean MacBride, Chairman of Amnesty International, and attended by about 300 delegates, mostly of non-governmental organizations.

The ICRC was represented, with observer status, by its Vice-President, Mr. Jean Pictet, who delivered the following address at the opening session :

“ Of the practices condemned, torture used as a means of extorting information seems the most odious and the most dangerous. Torture inflicts unspeakable suffering on those who undergo it. And it is a serious outrage upon the dignity of man, compelling him to perform acts or make statements against his will, and even reducing him to the level of slavery as in barbarous eras. Torture is as degrading for him who inflicts it as for him who undergoes it.

The practice has been universally condemned by civilized peoples since the end of the eighteenth century, when judicial torture was abolished. It is distressing to see it re-emerge, more or less clandestinely, and it would be a disastrous abdication if by keeping silent the public conscience appeared to consent to acts fundamentally contrary to the principles of law, to those principles which States formally recognized by ratifying the Geneva Conventions and proclaiming human rights.

With the many iniquitous acts of violence which are being committed in the world, there is every reason to fear that they may multiply and, by a fatal chain reaction, be perpetuated. There is a danger of being swept into a vicious spiral from which it will be increasingly hard to emerge. Some acts will never be fighting methods, but will always remain crimes. The uncompromising abolition of torture is therefore imperative.

The law is clear. Thus the Geneva Conventions prohibit torture in time of war, and human rights prohibit it at all times. They seem sufficient. What in our day is essential is to secure full application of those provisions everywhere. Governments must take really effective steps to ensure that no acts of torture are committed at any level of the military or civil hierarchy. They must institute very strict supervision and severely punish offenders.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, for its part, will welcome any effort made to abolish completely practices that are incompatible with the primary requirements of humanity.”

MISCELLANEOUS

The Conference split into several commissions, which considered four aspects of the problem of torture : (a) identifying the individuals and institutions responsible for torture ; (b) the social, political and economic background to torture ; (c) international, regional and national legal factors affecting torture practices, and (d) the physical and psychological effects on the victims of torture and the involvement of doctors.

Conclusions voted at the plenary sessions related, in particular, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5 of which states : " No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment ". One of the conclusions affirms that no act of torture is justifiable, that the laws prohibiting it are adequate and that the aim is to ensure that they are fully applied.
